

# *China reports drop in new virus infections despite fatality increase*

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Beijing, February 21 (RHC)-- Figures show a big drop in new coronavirus cases in mainland China, even as deaths from the infectious epidemic increase to 2,236 people. On Thursday, Chinese health officials reported 600 new infections with COVID-19, the lowest daily tally since late last month, and well down from the 1,749 new cases the day before. Confirmed cases now number at 75,000 while 118 new deaths were also recorded.

Infections in mainland China had displayed a continuous downward trend for the last three days already. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said any visible trend must be interpreted “very cautiously.”

Earlier this week, Chinese authorities said that their drastic containment efforts, including quarantining tens of millions of people in the hardest-hit central province of Hubei and imposing tight restrictions on movements in other cities across the Asian country, had begun to pay off.

“After arduous efforts, the situation is changing for the better,” said Foreign Minister Wang Yi late Wednesday, adding that Hubei and its quarantined capital, Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, were “still severely affected” by the epidemic. “But the situation is under effective control, while other regions are embracing comforting news,” the top Chinese diplomat said.

Richard Brennan, the regional emergency director at the WHO, said that Beijing had managed to make “tremendous progress in a short period of time” but at the same time cautioned that it had not reached a turning point just yet.

The biggest cluster of infection cases identified outside the Chinese epicenter has been reported on Diamond Princess, a British cruise ship quarantined off the Japanese port of Yokohama, where 621 of about 3,700 people on board — one sixth of the total — have tested positive for the virus.

Japan’s national broadcaster NHK, citing government sources, reported that two passengers of the ship — a man and a woman in their 80s — had died of the infection. Passengers began leaving the cruise ship this week. On Wednesday, one group of unaffected passengers left, and on Thursday morning, another group of around 500 people was set to leave. More than 70 cases have been confirmed in Japan.

Meanwhile, all schools and universities have been closed for Thursday as a preventive measure in the Iranian city of Qom, some 140 kilometers south of the capital, Tehran, following confirmation that two people died there of the virus, in the first confirmed cases in the country.

Iran’s Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani on Thursday called for immediate measures to counter a potential spread of the disease. Larijani made the remarks in a telephone conversation with Iran’s Minister of Health Saeed Namaki. In another telephone conversation with Bahram Sarmast, the governor of Qom Province, Larijani stressed the need to convene a provincial Security Council meeting and to take preventive measures as soon as possible.

In yet another call, Larijani urged Iran’s minister of education to arrange for necessary advice to be given to students and their parents about how to prevent or handle an infection.

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